

**ORDER OF SERVANTS OF MARY**  
**GENERAL CURIA**  
**PIAZZA SAN MARCELLO, 5 00187 ROME**

## **Identity and Spirituality of the Servant Mary**

The 2007 General Chapter established a General Secretariat for Ongoing Formation. Among other things this new secretariat was entrusted with the task of choosing an annual theme and furnishing material for discussion throughout the Order. The theme chosen for 2008 is “The Identity and Spirituality of the Servant of Mary.”

I would like to thank the Venetian Province and Father Piergiorgio M. di Domenico especially who prepared the first part of this paper (Historical and Spiritual Sources).

### **I. Historical and Spiritual Sources**

To guide and if possible facilitate our common discussion we offer here points of particular interest from the Rule, the Constitutions and records of our Order’s ancient and more recent history.

#### **1. Identity Card**

*... we commit ourselves, as did our First Fathers, to witness the gospel in fraternal communion and to be at the service of God and all people, drawing abiding inspiration from Mary, Mother and Servant of the Lord (Constitutions 1).*

It happened that [Blessed Philip] was going to Siena with a friar named Victor. While they were on the road they met two friars from the Order of Preachers coming from Germany. The Dominicans were surprised at the habit our friars wore and stopped to speak to Blessed Philip. They insisted on knowing what sort of life they led and what Order’s habit were they wearing. The man of God answered them saying: “If you want to know where we come from – we are natives of this region; if you ask about our condition we call ourselves Servants of the Glorious Virgin whose widow’s weeds we wear; our life is based on the example of the Apostles and we try to follow the Rule of the Most Holy Doctor, Augustine.”

[*Legenda “vulgata” del beato Filippo*, 8: “Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria,” I, pp. 269-270]

In this way, no one shall perform any task for his own benefit but all your work shall be done for the common good, with greater zeal and more dispatch than if each one of you were to work for yourself alone. For charity, as it is written, *is not self-seeking* (1 Cor 13:5) meaning that it places the common good before its own, not its own before the common good. So whenever you show greater concern for the common good than for your own, you may know that you are growing in charity. Thus, let the abiding virtue of charity prevail in all things that minister to the fleeting necessities of life.

[*Rule of St. Augustine*, V. 31]

Living together as the Apostles did is no less essential for us than for man to be rational; – just as depriving man of his essential form, the rational soul, makes him no longer human so too if we are deprived of the poverty of common life we are no longer ourselves – we have become something else; we are not friars, we are not Servants of Mary, our boast, we are not of God [...]

[Angelo Maria Montorsoli, *Lettera spirituale* (1596), Rome 1935, p. 211]

## 2. In the footsteps of our First Fathers

We extol those godly men who, after the Lord are our spiritual fathers. By the holiness of their word and example they begot us in the Order. Like fathers they watched over us and saw that we were nourished with spiritual food; they gave us **knowledge** (= contemplation), **art** (=service) and **science** (= quest for the common good).

[*Legenda de origine*, 1: “Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria,” I, p. 191]

*Our communities, following the pattern of community life created by our First Fathers [...] wish to manifest their love to the world around them [...] (Const. 79).*

Many perceived the scent and music of [our Fathers’] holy and virtuous life. With growing fervor people sought them out and were eager to go to the place whence so beautiful a scent and melody emanated. People converged on this mountain from all parts of Florence and the countryside [...] and said to each other [...] “Quickly let us hie to this sonorous (a play on words: Senario) mountain, this mountain perfumed by God. Let us climb to the summit and see these glorious men the source of the music we hear and the scent we perceive to learn from their charity-inspired words the ways of the Lord and prepare ourselves to walk in His paths and imitate their holiness. From this time on our whole lives will follow the pattern shown us by God’s servants on the mountain of the Lord.”

[*Legenda de origine*, 45: “Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria,” I, pp. 242-243]

*For us Servants, following the example of our First Fathers and the tradition of the Order, penance consists above all in charity understood as service to one another and in the experience of community life lived with sincere and generous commitment. (Const. 71).*

Wanting to keep close to the Lord, these godly men, our first fathers, came down from the mountain of worldly pride, down to humility, which is the foundation of all virtue. They built a dwelling on this foundation of humility and raised it up high on charity, the summit of all virtue. With the Lord’s help they made arrangements that were practical and at the same time fostered their spiritual life. Determined in all this to carry out the Lord’s will, they received into their community many friars and associates, such as they and the Lord deemed suitable. At the same time, at the Lord’s direction they opened other houses, places suitable to their penitential way of life.

[*Legenda de origine*, 49: “Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria,” I. Dal 1245 al 1348, Servitium ed. Sotto il Monte BG, 1998, p. 248.]

Very early clean the Fathers’ Chapter room and spread mats throughout so that the Fathers and Brothers can kneel on them; at the appropriate time after private Mass; when the refectory bell is rung all the Fathers and Brothers should assemble in the Chapter room; they should take their place with heads covered and in silence. The Father Rector should give a brief and effective talk that exhorts all to do the following: seek peace; practice fraternal charity; forgive the offenses or misdeeds weakness or temptation may have led a brother to commit; give good and effective example to others; be the first to ask forgiveness of all for the offensive words, acts or feelings piety discerns.

[*Rito di fratellanza* (Rite of Brotherhood) observed by the Hermits of Monte Senario on Holy Thursday: *Libro dell'osservanza regoalre*, Rome, General Archives, tit. XX, f. 34v]

### 3. Fraternity and service

#### a) communities and individuals

*Our communities are formed of persons who have chosen the way of life of the Servants of Mary and want to live in fraternal communion and mutual esteem in order to achieve the perfect dignity and freedom of the children of God and dedicate themselves in love to the service of others.* (Const. 8).

Let all of you then live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honoring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become

[*Rule of St. Augustine*, I, 9]

We are brothers – not by flesh or blood – but through the grace of our common vocation, our common profession; we are brothers because we are all servants, all sons of the Queen of Martyrs who has chosen us from among thousands and clad us in the habit of her sorrows; she has destined us to console her to comfort her in the other cruel outrages she endures at the foot of the Cross. Therefore let us love one another as brothers; let us help each other in our endeavors and commitments.

[*Parole di un Padre e Pastore. Prediche scelte del Curatino di Viareggio*, edited by Pedro Maria Suárez, Rome 1962 (Studia Historica Minora IV), p. 23]

#### b) service of love

[...] *Desiring to express the charism of the Order, we give ourselves in service to others* [...] (Const. 73)

In his special concern for our first fathers God prepared them perfectly [...] Once they were together, their main objective was to fulfill the commandment of well ordered love [...]

They loved God with their whole heart .... with their whole soul ... And they loved the Lord unceasingly with their whole mind. They put all the powers of their intellect, reason, study and discovery at his service. He alone they wished to serve forever and He alone they considered their Lord [...] their charitable works involved their neighbor as well. They searched out the needs of others and as men of compassion sought to meet these spiritual and material needs.

[*Legenda de origine*, 35, 37: “*Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria*,” I, pp. 231-233]

The community envisioned in our Constitutions presents a challenge both from the perspective of our interior life and from that of our apostolic service. In the community we are already in contact with the brother who hungers or thirsts, who is sick or imprisoned, whose dignity is not recognized, who suffers on the cross, who needs to be loved, who sees us on the road to Jericho and asks us to get down off our horse and act as a neighbor. The community is the primary workshop of compassion for mankind, the first test of our faith and charity. How can we claim to love the distant brother we cannot see when we do not love the brother next to us, the one who lives under our roof and sits at our table, the one who is truly our “neighbor”?

[Letter of the Prior General and his Council “*All’inizio del nostro sessennio*” (At the Beginning of our Six-year Term), May 24, 1990, Prot. 370/90, p. 11]

c) servants and brothers for the Church

*The vocation of the Servant of Mary is a particular expression of the fundamental condition of the People of God, a people made up of brothers and sisters [...]* (Const. 105)

Like all communities of evangelical/apostolic life, every Servite fraternity must be a genuine faith community in the Church. In this community brothers share a special concern for the things of the Lord and long for the coming of the Kingdom (...)

The actual structure of the fraternity's life should emphasize the primacy of contemplation and the interior life alternating prayer in common (liturgy and *lectio divina*) with private prayer – personal encounter with the Word, colloquy with the Father and adoration in the Spirit.

All of the brothers' activities should reflect the atmosphere of serenity and recollection that characterizes the house or that part of it reserved for the fraternity.

Each friar should be devoted to religious and sacred studies; these studies will lead to greater contemplation of the mystery of God – something that will be revealed to every sincere individual.

For support in their sometimes uncertain and fragmented spiritual journey the friars should rediscover the value of religious friendship. Through their enlightened understanding our older brothers should show themselves to be genuinely wise; they should nurture the growth of fraternity in the Spirit.

[Chapter of the Lombardy-Veneto Servite Province Udine 1969: “*Registro delle province dei Servi in Italia. Lombardia e Veneto (1967-1970)* edited by D.M. Montagna, Milan 1970, p. 157]

THE CHAPTER THINKS CERTAIN CRITERIA WILL HELP US  
DETERMINE WHETHER – FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE  
CONSTITUTIONS - A SERVITE COMMUNITY IS TRUE TO ITS IDENTITY  
AND *RAISON-D'ÊTRE*:

- a) Do the friars pray and celebrate the Eucharist together regularly? (*Const.* arts. 28-29);
- b) Does the community regularly celebrate chapters and plan common efforts and the work of individual friars? (*Const.* arts. 20, 34, 27, 196);
- c) Is the community prepared and willing to receive candidates for the Order and provide them with a first experience of our life?
- d) Can the community guarantee its members the time and opportunity for updating and renewal? (*Const.* arts. 31a-b-c);
- e) Does the community's apostolic service (parish, sanctuary, school, etc) reflect the life-style and witness required by our Constitutions? (arts. 73, 75);
- f) Does the community have at least three solemn professed members residing in it?  
(*Mexico City General Chapter 1995*: “*Acta Ordinis Servorum B.M.V.*” 61 (1996) pp. 168-169.

#### 4. The Virgin Mary

*In order to serve the Lord and their brothers and sisters, the Servants have dedicated themselves from their origins to the Mother of God, the Blessed One of the Most High.* (Const. 6).

Fearing their own imperfection (the seven men who began our Order) made a wise decision: they went humbly to the feet of the Queen of Heaven, the most glorious Virgin Mary, their hearts overflowing with love, and asked that she, their mediatrix and advocate, reconcile them with and recommend them to her Son and in her generous indulgence towards their imperfections graciously obtain abundant merit for them. To honor God they placed themselves at the service of His Virgin

Mother and from that time on they wanted to be called Servants of Saint Mary and live a life suggested by wise individuals.

[*Legenda de origine*, 18: “Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria, I, pp. 211-212]

*Our communities are to bear witness to the human and evangelical values seen in Mary* (Const. 7)

Your family was born under the protection of Our Lady at a time that was disastrous for the Church and the state. There was rage, hatred and conflict throughout the cities; there seemed to be no other remedy but propagating devotion to so pure a Mother.

[...] No doubt the love for Christ’s Mother that inspired your founders has strengthened the souls of so many of their illustrious followers – men famous for their lives, men who drew so much inspiration from their source, Our Lady. We are referring to their singular devotion to meditation on the Word of God (Cf. *Luke* 2,19; 2,51), their vibrant love of neighbor (Cf. *Luke* 1,39ff, *John* 2,1ff), their firm adherence to the Will of God [...] It is at the foot of the Cross where she suffers, sacrifices and dies in her soul along with her Son that the glory of Our Lady is most apparent, most like the morning star. This is a path we must all follow – especially those of us who are religious.

[Discourse of Pope Paul VI to the 1974 General Chapter: “*Capitolo generale di rinnovamento dell’Ordine dei Servi di Maria, Roma, 15 settembre – 14 ottobre 1974*”, Rome Curia Generalizia O.S.M., 1974, pp. 55-56]

*Desiring to express the charism of the Order, we give ourselves in service to others and so prolong the active presence of the Mother of Jesus in the history of salvation* (Const. 73).

According to the spirit, inspiration or spiritual path they follow, the Church’s religious orders can be divided into three great groups: those who search for understanding [...], those who practice mercy and kindness towards all living things, those devoted to immediate action [...]

The Order of Servants of Mary belongs to the second of these groups: we share a life of compassion, strive for empathy with all beings, and become unflinching and resolute beacons of mercy.

The Virgin Mary is a manifestation of God’s infinite mercy in creation; to be Servants of Mary involves continuing through our personal and community life the mission, the nurturing strength and light of Mary, most holy [...] Creation reveals its mystery through a feminine presence; the revelation follows the rhythm of beauty, harmony and the geometric movements of the One Creator towards the manifold creation. This means that behind and within every manifestation of created existence there is Divine thought and a specific act of love and compassion [...] When this thought takes root our consciousness is freed from the ignorance of indifference, violence and aggression; we become open to an emotional and shared awareness of every created being. The fruits of mercy take root in us and give us new rhythms, new visions of existence and all that exists.

[G. Vannucci, *I Servi e la Vergine Madre*, “*Servitium*” 26/27, 1983, pp. 91-93]

*In accordance with a fundamental aspect of our charism, we Servants of Mary must especially deepen our knowledge of the role of the Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and of the Church in order to communicate the richness of this knowledge to the faithful and lead them to authentic Marian devotion.* (Const. 161).

Among the gifts that have been bestowed upon us as Servants of St. Mary there is the Mother of the Lord herself. This gift must be shared with all. Christian churches – even those outside Catholicism – should see in our Order a small sister church with the charism to proclaim Mary.

Within the framework of this inescapable responsibility we urge all Servites to support in your provinces and congregations those centers that promote knowledge of Our Lady and genuine Marian devotion.

[*Servi del Magnificat. Il cantico della Vergine e la vita consacrata* (Capitolo generale 1995), Sotto il Monte BG, Servitium editrice, 1996, pp. 139-140]

### **Bibliography**

1. The booklets published by the 1974 General Chapter Commission to explain the Constitutions are still valid. Communities would do well to consult these booklets as they discuss the current theme:

- *Le ispirazioni centrali delle nuove costituzioni dei Servi*, edited by L.M. De Candido, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 1, Rovato 1975.

- *Note storiche e riflessioni sulle nuove costituzioni dei Servi (Madrid 1968)* [art. 1-5] edited by R.M. Tauci, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 2, Rovato 1975.

- *La fraternità*, edited by D.M. Montagna, P.M. Graffius, L.M. De Candido, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 3, Rovato 1975.

- *La vergine Maria*, edited by the Istituto Storico dei Servi di Maria [Servite Historical Institute], D.M. Montagna, I.M. Calabuig, P.M. Graffius, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 4, Rovato 1976.

- *La povertà evangelica*, edited by F.A. Dal Pino, G.M. Vannucci, L.M. De Candido, P.M. Graffius, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 5, Rovato 1976.

- *Collegialità, autorità e obbedienza*, edited by A.M. Lazzarin, G.M. Vannucci, D.M. Montagna, P.M. Graffius, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 6, Rovato 1976.

- *Pregheiera e liturgia nelle nuove costituzioni dei Servi*, edited by D.M. Sartor, Saggi e sussidi sulle costituzioni dei Servi, 7, Rovato 1976.

2. *Identità dei Servi di Maria*, Atti del convegno internazionale O.S.M. Roma – Luglio 1974, Ed. Marianum, Rome 1975.

3. *Il cammino dei Servi di Maria*, edited by L.M. De Candido, Servitium, Gorle BG 2001 (Cf. the bibliography, pp. 295-299)

4. *Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria*, vols. I and II.

## **II. Servants of Mary: an overview of the present and its challenges**

On the anniversary of Benedict XI's Bull *Dum Levamus* (the definitive approval of the Order) the Prior General, Fra Ángel M. Ruiz Garnica addressed a letter to the entire Servite Family, "A family with a future after 700 years of life." The letter discusses our present-day problems but at the same time it encourages our friars to look to the future with confidence. It states that our identity is something more than an abstract idea – it is our very way of living and loving. In short it is our life.

The fact that the Order has spread to so many nations and continents has been a blessing. It enables us to know first hand, from the experiences of our brothers, the complexity of human life, the wide diversity of situations, the riches of other religions and cultures, the variety of natural resources and life-styles, the diversity of political situations, etc.

In recent decades we have witnessed a gradual decrease in the number of friars in the long-existing communities of Europe and North America along with the aging of friars in the same areas. The Order is changing its physiognomy. From an ethnic and cultural perspective we are facing something never encountered before in the Order's long history. New demands and problems confront the Order today.

In his conference at the 2001 General Chapter, Fra Clodovis M. Boff spoke about existential disorientation, global poverty and the logic of violence. Six years later we face a

secularized world with an enormous void at its center. We have lost sight of our basic points of reference.

Consecrated life is undergoing a time of transition and we cannot ignore the fact that we are in a period of frequent and radical change. The first challenge we must confront is understanding the current status of consecrated life.

In this emerging sociological, historical, religious and cultural framework, the Prior General reaffirms the need to recover the identity of our charism, to understand the prophetic dimension of our mission and to create the conditions necessary to achieve it. Our fundamental mission is not “to do” many things but “to be” genuine Servants of Mary. We must strive to express our charismatic identity in what we do.

(from *Relazione del Priore Generale, Capitolo Generale Elettivo 2007, Acta Ordinis*, pp. 89-94, 132)

Questions:

1. Given the diverse and complex situations in which we live are we capable of reading the signs of the times?
2. What novel elements can we discern in our lives as Servants of Mary that shed light on our times?
3. Using our charism as a point of departure how can we meet the challenges of today’s Church and society?

### **III. Evaluation**

At the end of the meetings devoted to the study and discussion of this theme there should be a written evaluation. The purpose of this exercise is to articulate a self-evaluation of the identity we experience personally as we journey along the path of our vocation. Lay people (co-workers, parishioners, colleagues, young people) must be involved in this study/survey if we are to achieve a global overview of our identity. The friars involved should decide the appropriate time and place for these meetings. The person in charge of ongoing formation in each jurisdiction should collect written information and pass it on to the Priors, Vicars and Delegates Provincial and to the General Secretary for Ongoing Formation.

1. What is the image of a Servite that emerges from the friars’ community discussions?
2. What do the people with and among whom we work have to say?
3. Are there any joint activities that involve friars, sisters, lay people and communities who share our charism faithfully and creatively? What signs are there of this?

### **IV. Praying with Our Seven Holy Fathers**

The secretariat would suggest that these discussions begin with the prayer *In Praise of our Seven Holy Fathers*.